

United States Senate

May 22, 2019

The Honorable Peter Gaynor
Acting Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street SW
Washington, DC 20472

Dear Acting Administrator Gaynor:

The Camp Fire that swept through the town of Paradise and the surrounding areas was the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in the history of California, leaving 14,000 households without a safe home.¹ Six months after it was contained, survivors are still struggling to find sanitary, accessible, and affordable temporary housing. Many households – particularly low-income families – have been forced into homelessness and are living in tents, cars, or overcrowded homes. While the destruction from the Camp Fire presented your agency with considerable challenges, I am concerned that FEMA is not utilizing all the tools it has available to ensure that all survivors receive the housing assistance they need.

According to reports in March, almost 27,000 people had applied for Individual Assistance from FEMA,² but as of May 6, the agency had approved less than 8,000 applications across Butte, Los Angeles, and Ventura counties.³ Among the few applicants that have been approved, some were denied multiple times before finally receiving assistance. As of April 25, less than 300 households were living in mobile or temporary housing units with thousands more continuing to wait for a temporary home.⁴

Home vacancy rates were already low throughout Butte and neighboring counties, meaning those displaced from Paradise and other areas essentially had no rental housing options following the

¹ CAL Fire, "Camp Fire Incident Update," November 25, 2018.

http://cdfdata.fire.ca.gov/admin8327985/cdf/images/incidentfile2277_4326.pdf

² Brianna Sacks, "California Wildfire Survivors Say They're Living in Dire Conditions And There's Little Help," *Buzzfeed*, March 18, 2019. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/briannasacks/california-camp-fire-paradise-victims-homeless>

³ FEMA, "California Wildfires (DR-4407): Financial Assistance. Accessed May 6, 2019. <https://www.fema.gov/disaster/4407>

⁴ RJ Ghilarducci, "Camp Fire Recovery Update: April 25, 2019," *Cal OES*, April 25, 2019. <http://www.oesnews.com/camp-fire-recovery-update-april-25-2019/>

fire.⁵ Neighboring municipalities like Chico and Oroville have graciously worked to accommodate the thousands of displaced survivors, but the towns lack the infrastructure to integrate the influx of people, leading to congested roads, strained resources, and a complete lack of affordable housing. Survivors able to participate in the Transitional Sheltering Assistance (TSA) program are crowding local hotels in an area that relies on tourism from the nearby national forests. Some displaced households – particularly low-income families – face barriers to even accessing the TSA program since hotels sometimes require a security deposit, credit card, or additional “resort fees” that FEMA does not cover. Following the 2017 Tubbs Fire in Sonoma County, CA, the number of people living unhoused increased by 6% with another 100,000 living in unstable conditions.⁶

As highlighted in a recent news story, the lack of housing has far-reaching consequences. Children and teens struggle to attend and focus in make-shift school classrooms, face difficulties finishing homework without access to internet or electricity, and have taken on additional responsibilities to help their families or support themselves. Living in cramped housing conditions can often exacerbate family tensions, and many young people supporting themselves cannot receive badly needed assistance.⁷

Despite the magnitude of this housing crisis, FEMA has yet to utilize the Disaster Housing Assistance Program (DHAP), which provides rental assistance and wrap-around case management to disaster survivors. Although rental assistance through DHAP would not address the lack of housing options in Butte County and surrounding areas, it would allow willing households to relocate and obtain the support needed to get back on their feet. DHAP successfully provided housing for low-income survivors following Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Gustav, Ike, and Sandy and would provide desperately needed assistance for survivors of the Camp Fire.

I welcome the recent progress and expedited efforts to set up temporary trailers, including the Rosewood Subdivision and the Gridley Industrial Park temporary housing communities. These trailers will provide safe and secure temporary housing for hundreds of families once they are fully up and running. However, I am worried that the planned units will not be sufficient to meet the temporary housing needs of all survivors, particularly those most in need.

Rebuilding Paradise and developing additional affordable housing will take time, but the federal government – through FEMA – has the obligation to provide temporary disaster housing

⁵ Sarah Ruiz-Grossman, “Months After California’s Deadliest Wildfire, Many Still Have Nowhere To Call Home,” *HuffPost*, February 23, 2019. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/camp-fire-california-months-later-homeless_n_5c6b4823e4b0e8eb46b8f3e4

⁶ Sonja Hutson, “Sonoma County Homeless Population Up Due to North Bay Fires,” *KQED*, July 7, 2018. <https://www.kqed.org/news/11679471/sonoma-county-homeless-population-up-due-to-north-bay-fires>

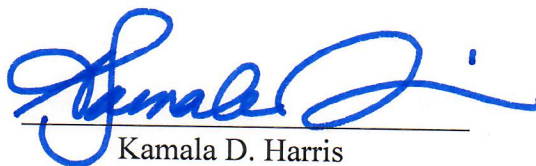
⁷ Brianna Sacks, “Students Live In Tents, Do Homework Under Flashlights, And Deal Without Textbooks Months After California’s Massive Camp Fire,” *Buzzfeed*, April 25, 2019. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/briannasacks/students-displaced-camp-fire>

assistance to ensure that survivors are no longer living in unsafe and unsanitary conditions. As such, we request that you answer the following questions regarding FEMA's housing response:

- What policy and programmatic barriers exist to delivering housing assistance?
- How is FEMA planning to address the barriers to setting up temporary housing units and finish placing trailers and manufactured housing units?
- How can Congress help address these issues?
- Why has FEMA not approved more Individual Assistance applications?
- Why has FEMA not utilized the Disaster Housing Assistance Program (DHAP) for the many survivors who were forced to leave the area as a result of the lack of housing and employment opportunities? Are there future plans to use DHAP? If so, what do these plans entail?
- Has FEMA worked with other federal agencies like the Departments of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Agriculture (USDA) to provide additional housing resources for low-income survivors?

Thank you for your attention on this matter. I look forward to your response by May 31, 2019.

Sincerely,



Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator